DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 400 687 FL 024 164

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TITLE Chinese Learners' Communicative Incompetence: Causes and Solutions.
PUB DATE [96]
NOTE 16p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Chinese; *Communicative Competence (Languages); *Educational Environment; *English (Second Language); Language Teachers; Learning Motivation; Listening Skills; Second Language Instruction; Skill Development; Speech Skills; *Student Motivation
IDENTIFIERS *Chinese People

ABSTRACT

Some causes of difficulty experienced by Chinese learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) in attaining communicative competence in the target language include lack of appropriate teacher strategies; teachers' limited English language proficiency; neglect of education in the target culture; lack of communicative activities; students' instrumental, not integrative, learning motivation; poorly designed textbook; limited English input outside the classroom; and exposure primarily to written English within the classroom. Proposed solutions include use of a five-stage teaching method (review, presentation, drill, practice, consolidation) that corresponds to the stages of information processing, a learner- oriented environment and skill-oriented teaching method, increased practice in listening and speaking skills, teaching of reading and writing skills as a means of communicating ideas, increased cultural awareness, stimulation of student motivation through classroom and extracurricular activities that are both authentic and of interest to the students, creation of a low-anxiety learning environment, training teachers to adapt instructional materials for communicative practice, natural and realistic classroom language practice, and increased use of English in the classroom. Contains seven references. (MSE)

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Chinese Learners' Communicative Incompetence: Causes and Solutions

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Instruction

English teaching is now viewed as the development of the communicative competence, which, according to Hymes, refers to the ability to produce utterances which are not only grammatical but also appropriate to the linguistic and situational context. Unfortunately, even after several years of English learning, most high school students in the mainland of China are still communicatively incompetent. There are various causing factors and the auther offers some solutions to this problem. Successful solutions will have both theoretical and practical implication in English language teaching(ELT).

1. Causes of Communicative Incompetence

Teaching is a four-way relationship between Men (teachers), Methods and Materials they are using, and Masters (students). The communicative incompetence must be contigent upon a combination of these factors.

1.1. Factors on the part of teachers involve the ELT methodology which over-stresses the development of the linguistic competence and overlooks the communicative language teaching. "The linguistic competence is part of communicative competence" (Allright, 1979). It cannot guarantee the communicative competence which goes beyond the linguistic competence to include the "socialinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence" (Canale and Swain, 1980). Thus the linguistic competence is a means while the communicative competence is an end of

ELT which should be given priority in teaching. However, many English teachers in China have failed to see this distinction and thus reversed the relationship between the means and end. They teach students to learn about language through grammar–translation rather than to learn to use language for communication. As a result, students usually get good grades in school but perform inappropriately in real–life situation.

The second factor is the teachers' low proficiency of language skills which are a prerequisite of their profession. This low proficiency is reflected by their short and poor teacher–training. According to an official investigation, the percentage of China's middle school English teachers with B. A. degree is only 28% and what's worse, 12% of them are Russian majors and 8% were graduated during the disastrous Cultural Revolution with a 3–year B. A. program. Teachers with A. A. degrees and even with secondary diplomas are the majority, with 40% and 29% respectively (Zuo, 1990). So poor are their education and thus bad language skills that teachers are unable to develop the students' communicative competence and that they have to adopt a knowledge–oriented method which fits their proficiency level but which neglects the communicative language teaching.

Finally, teachers have overlooked the target cultural teaching. Language is inextrically tied to culture. Chinese students learning English cannot hope to obtain the communicative competence without a good knowledge of the culture related to that language. Since the target culture is so different from ours that what Hymes calls the"rules of speaking"should be introduced to students. But this importance has been completely neglected in traditional classrooms, causing students culturally incompetent. As a result, students are able to"know all the words", but still unable to interprete the meaning of an utterance. What's worse, they interprete and respond what they have heard according to

Chinese rules of speaking, thus frequently resulting in shock, disappointment and even in embarrassment of English speaking people. Once a Chinese scholar together with his wife was invited to attend an international conference in the USA. When they landed from the plane on the airport, the American reception officer paid a compliment to his wife's beauty, but the scholar gave the Chinese gracious response in English, "Where! Where! "The receptionist felt surprised and embarrassed and had to reply: "Everywhere! "The scholar had in mind the Chinese socialiguistic value of the term, thus making this typical cultural mistake.

1.2. On the part of students, one factor is their lack of communicative activities. No matter how high teachers' language proficiency, how much cultural knowledge they teach, students who have little practice cannot be expected to acquire a good achievement of language learning because language is not taught but learned. In the teacher-centered classroom in China, students have little opportunity to deliver what Krashen called "output"—the end produce of FL learning. Thus the comprehensible input is of little use because students are able only to produce output so marked by inappropriateness and gross error that it has little communicative viability, or virtually in comprehensible noise.

The other factor is students' low motivation of learning. According to Lamber and Gardner (1972), there are two types of motivation — instrumental and integrative. Instrumental motive refers to motivation to acquire a language as a means for attaining instrumental goals: furthering a career, reading technical materials, and translation. This type of motivation has some relevance to Chinese students, but most of the students regard English learning as unnecessary burden and would have given it up if they would. They are learning because they have to,

not because they want to. Their motivation, if any, is externally forced, not internally stimulated. Such forced motivation cannot ensure perseverence and students' efforts stay at the receptive competence and seldom go beyond the more difficult productive competence. Integrative motive is employed when learners wish to integrate themselves with and become a part of that society. Learners with such motivation have a genuine interest in the FL community. They want to learn the language in order to communicate with its people more satisfactorily and to gain closer contact with them and their culture. But this motivation is lacking in Chinese learners because the language is to be used for future external rather than internal communication. Most learners have or simply no awareness of communicative need.

1.3. Teaching materials and textbooks also exert influence on the achievement of FL learning. If the prescribed textbooks are designed for the sake of grammar mastery and not for communication, students taught with such textbooks are most likely to become communicatively incompetent. Generally, most English textbooks applied in either middle schools or colleges are compiled knowledge-orientedly at the expense of skill development. Usually texts are arranged in the order for grammatical complexity to serve the purpose of grammatical analysis. Very few textbooks provide students with opportunity to express themselves meaningfully. Even today the obsolete political-oriented texts can be found such as"We Study as Lenin Studied", "A Lesson in Class Struggle"," We Study for the Revolution. "Such texts are for moral education in disguise and are filled with Chinglish expressions for some untranslatable political terms.

1.4. Chinese linguistic environment plays an unfavorable role in ELT. In some provinces in Canada where both English and French are spoken,

when students with one of the languages as their first language and are learning the other as the second language, students have rich resources of language input and output both inside and outside the classroom. If they are proficient enough, they may have many opportunities to particpate in real communication. However, students in China are learning English in an environment where Chinese is the first language and where English is a language reserved for contact with English-speaking people, yet students have little opportunity to contact them and there are just a limited contexts in which students can practise speaking English. In other words, there is little chance of learning and acquiring English naturally as in an English-speaking environment.

Because of no natural linguistic environment, the classroom becomes the most important place to provide a compensated linguistic environment. Thus the learners' input is mainly through teachers' formal instruction. Just being the case, teachers' speech is of vital importance in serving as a model for their students. But because of low language proficiency, the majority of teachers can only conduct lessons in Chinese with occasional classroom English. So students are left with exposure only to the written language which is again carefully controlled and abridged and somewhat distorted. Exposed to such artificial language, students find themselves unable to transfer their ability to understand classroom language to the ability to understand native speakers naturally outside the classroom. As a result, students often recite the language memorized in classrooms rather than to create and improvise the language. Thus communication becomes the echo of classroom memorized dialogues.

2. Solutions to Communicative Incompetence

Having unlocked the secrets lying behind communicative incompetence,

we are now tackling the problem in the order of causing factors mentioned above.

2.1. Teachers' Responsibility

Teachers should realize the essence of language as a tool for communication in order to shift away from the traditional teaching to the communicative language teaching.

2.1.1. To use the Five-stage Teaching Method

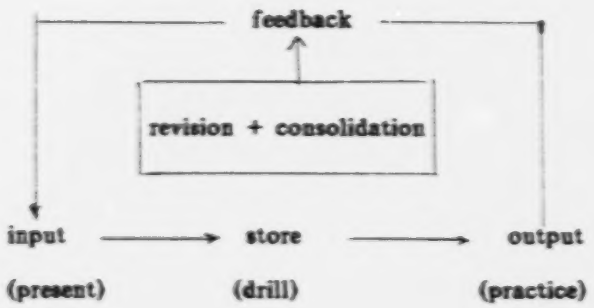
For the mastery of linguistic and communicative competences, we suggest to use the five-stage teaching method which is advanced on the new coursebook "Junior English for China" complied by the People's Educational Press of China and the British Longman Group Limited.

The five stages are:1)revision, 2)presentation, 3)drilling, 4)practice, 5)consolidation. Specifically, after reviewing related language in step 1, teachers go on with the new lesson. In step 2, they present new language points, either in spoken or written form by necessary explanation and/or demostration in teaching situations to make pronunciations, forms and meanings as clear as possible. In step 3, they drill the items in forms of mechanical, meaningful and communicative drills with stress on making correct forms in order to help students consolidate previous learning and form language habits and skills. In step 4, they organize students to communicate in the activities to use the new items for communication. Finally, if necessay drill the items students have not mastered and go on for consolidation of above achievements and for development of writing skills, i. e. students use what has been learned to practise written activities. The method is to develop a certain degree of linguistic and communicative competences.

Generally speaking, the revision stage is an introductary stage which is to revice related language so that students can link old knowledge to

new knowledge. The presentation stage is for the teacher to teach new language points and for students to meet and understand them. The three drills which are merged with the presentation are for students to master the language to gain language fluency, accuracy and habit formation, thus helping develop the linguistic competence. The practice of communicative activities is aimed at the ability to use language for communication freely, appropriately and effectively. The last stage is for consolidation of what has been learned to help form the communicative competence. It comes at the end of the lesson, which means that the class can revise all the new language points at the same time. In a word, the implication of this procedure is to enable students to gain fluent and accurate language points and also to output the gained information — to use language for communication freely, appropriately and effectively.

The Five Stage conforms to the course of information processing as follows:



The order of processing the information is from the input to the output through storing stage. The Five Stage conforms to this law. For the input students use their eyes and ears and also brain for the receptive skill, and for the output they use mouths, hands and also brains for produtive skills. The storing process is the transformation of the two,

without which the input is useless and the output is impossible. And the feedback by the first stage of information guides the teacher's correct revision and presentation of information.

This method also reflects the principle of student centeredness In the five stage, the practising time in the three drills and the communicative activities is longer than the teacher's presentation. The rough proportion of parts of the 45-minute lesson may be: for revision and presentation we may use 10 minutes; drilling 10; practice 20; and drilling if necessary and consolidation 5, thus ensuring teacher's concise explanation and students ample practice, i. e. reflecting the student centeredness. (Of course this timing is not rigidly defined and may be changed flexibly according to the actual teaching conditions).

2.1.2. Teach the Four Skills in a Communicative Way

Listening, speaking, reading and writing are the four basic language skills for communication. To teach them in a communicative way needs a learner-oriented atmosphere which entails a skill-oriented teaching method to gradually loozen the control over all classroom activities to enable students to acquire the language through use, through communication.

In listening practice, teachers should reduce the usual kind of mimicry or memorization exercises as in the traditional classrooms and language laboratories. Students must be enabled to listen with full attention to something that interests and challenges them, to get at the meaning of what they have heard, and then to produce meaningful responses that show they have understood. Also, do not teach listening as a passive skill but enable students to be familiarized with characteristics of sounds, grammar and vocabulary of the language which play a part in the students' listening comprehension. Finally there are needs for some

working strategies such as prediction of what the speaker will probably be saying as soon as students have heard the first chunk of the utterance, inference of meaning of unfamiliar words, and for understanding the culture of English speakers.

The most important task in teaching speaking is to elicit speech from students for communication. Teachers must ensure that students have something to talk about that interests them. In a Chinese context, the best we can do is to adapt stories of human interest carried on various English-language newspapers and magazines for classroom activities. Local issues and human interest stories from local media are also exploitable. What is required to teachers is to relate them in class or, for some, translate into English and hand out to students as scenarios. Also teachers must try to help students talk in English what they are most likely to talk about in Chinese outside English classes.

The purpose of reading necessitates the reading skills of scanning, skimming, reading for thorough comprehension and critical reading. Teachers also must set reading in the context of the communicative use of language: to give the students reasons for reading; help them to acquire reading skills appropriate to the task at hand; encourage them to predict and infer, to extract information by using the syntactic/semantic clues as well as cultural cues.

In traditional classrooms, writing exercises and even compositions only serve as a reinforcement of structure and vocabulary studies, rather than as a means to convey information or ideas. For improvement, pay stress on the freer but not controlled type of writing. At this advanced level, students have gradually acquired sufficient control of structure, vocabulary and the mechanics of writing to write freely on a wide range of topics with a minimum of errors. Therefore, major attention should be

given to organization and presentation of materials and stylistic matters. But since writing is a means of communicating ideas, the contextual pragmatic knowledge is required on the part of writers, for they cannot be expected to write intelligently about something they know nothing about.

2.1.3. Prevent Cultural Mistakes

The major causes of cultural mistakes are unquestionably inadquate knowledge of and insufficient exposure to the target culture as well as lack of comparative studies of the two cultures. All this comes down to the failure to give sufficient attention to cuturally-oriented course in ELT. To change this situation, teachers should increase students' cultural awareness, consiciously reflect cultural perspectives in the course of teaching, let the students know that a good command of language forms alone is inadequate for the needs of communication, and also explain not only grammatical usage but also referential meanings and social meanings. In addition, teachers should also try to create situational activities and through role playing explain and demonstrate the differences in language behabviors between the two cultures in similar situations so that students will become aware what are good behaviors and what are bad manners, and improve their communicative competence.

Students should have easier access to visual aids such as filmes and videotapes. It is generally agreed that what helps in culture acquisition is first and foremost personal contact with native speakers, followed by access to films and videotapes. If conditions permit, English films should be shown to students regularly. Documantaries, newsreels, educational serials and the like will all be of help.

2.2. Students' Practice and Motivation

Because of students' lack of communicative activities, attempts

should be made to provide as much as possible for students to develop communicative competence while practice for the achievement of linguistic competence is given. One way of stimulating communicative practice is to provide a challenging kind of activities to train students' effective expression of language functions. For example, in the problem-solving activity, students are provided shared cues to discuss how to solve a puzzle like"Who is the murderer in the detective story? " Another kind of communicative activities may be the role play which contains a social context"in order to develop greater social acceptability in the language"(Littlewood, 1983) . The role cards provide detailed cues of speaker's intention, attitude to each other, status and possible relations. These must be taken into account in students' linguistic enactment of the situation.

On the other hand, there are such extracurricular activities as English Corner, English Club, English Speech Contest which come close to the way the language is used in the target community. Research has shown that students who are frequenters to the activities are much better at communication than those who seldom visit there. If possible, fluency teachers and native English speakers should be invited for participation to ensure authentic communicative situation.

One important feature of communicative activity is that it contains the information gap. In classroom, one student must be in a position to tell another something that the second student does not know. The exchanges like asking a student holding a pen in his hand, "Do you have a pen? "or two students practising a memorized dialogue without creative and improvisational use of the language are not communicative. They are even harmful because they lead students away from the use of language for communication. These exercises only demonstrate the"signification"

rather than"value"of language(Widdowson, 1981).

One the other hand, since learners' motivation has their values to play in ELT, teachers can do much in this area to enhance the communicative competence. There is a need for teachers to cultivate and maintain students' interest of learning. As a rule, most students of junior grade one, because of just contacting the target language, show high curiosity of English and interest of study, but there is a drastic decrease of curiousity and interest at the junior grade two because the target language is introduced as a subject of knowledge rather than being used as the medium of genuine communication, causing the serious problem of polarization. One solution is for the teachers not to simply teach grammar, do numerous written exercises and then abandon those taught, but to recycle them through meaningful activities. Thus learning becomes a communication-oriented process which is what most learners are intersted in.

There is another need for teachers to create a low-anxiety atmosphere in the classrooms and to avoid over-correction for language fluency. In traditional classrooms, the teachers pay more attention than normal to how something is said and less to what is said. By doing so, they may destroy students' confidence and make them afraid of speaking. Thus the psychological costs here may be too great. In fact, both accuracy and fluency are interdependent, they are not mutually exclusive. A rigorous training in the language system can and should go hand in hand with constant fluency practice, even from the very beginning.

2.3. Text Modification

Chinese textbook designers might have not recognized the English learning goal, so their materials are only lead to a good linguistic competence but poor communicative competence. Thus more communication-

oriented materials are needed for compensation. They should contain basic rules of speaking: the patterns of social linguistic behavior of the language such as address-system, remedical interchanges and interactional strategies, and speech acts such as apologies, invitations and compliments.

Teachers may be forced to use textbooks containing predominatly manipulative drills. The problem then is how to enable students to practise the structures and vocabulary presented manipulatively in the text in a way that more closely approximates real communication. Celec-Murcia(1984)resolves this problem by way of illustrative of how to teach the verb *have*. After the mechanical drills, the teacher introduces a more communicative alternative. This guessing game uses pictures which cannot be seen by students for the sake of information gap. They use wh-questions to guess what the animal each picture *has*. This is an example as an interesting improvement over the controlled exercises. In short, ideal classroom instruction, when we are using traditional materials, can be described as one in which each new pattern structure is first established as an automatic reflex habit by means of pattern practice at the mechanical level and then used as a means of communication by means of communicative drills and exercises.

2.4. Environment Improvements

Since Chinese linguistic environment is not favorable for ELT, teachers should make classroom teaching situational to make classroom more natural and realistic. Thus students place themselves in the situation so as to associate what they see(situation, visual image) with what they hear (sounds, aural image). Therefore, language should be introduced in context, and drills and activities be carried on realistically in appropriate situations. Any type of exercises, in which students do not have to think about the situation in which the language

is used, is mechanical and unrealistic.

Audio-visual mediums can be used to afford a lifelike situation for communication . Used as an imaginary tour guide, for example, they enable to help students travel all over the world to communicate with English-speaking people. Chinese students could hardly go to the target countries to polish their English. However, they could have opportunity to listen to or speak with the native speakers through audio-visual mediums.

Finally, English should be spoken not only in conducting lessons but also during communicative activities. A rich English-speaking environment is a decisive factor for successful language learning. In China the classroom instruction is a main way for students to be exposed to English. If teachers speak Chinese throughout classes, students may not have opportunity to listen and speak English. Quite a number of teachers today use the"fear"that students are unable to understand as an excuse for not using English in class. However, teaching experience shows that if teachers speak English a little more slowly and with proper repetition and use visual aids of various kinds, students will surely understand and then get used to teaching in English gradually. The real reason for some teachers not to speak English is their inability to do so. The best solution is for them to improve their own language proficiency. For a qualified English teacher, there is no reason for not speaking English in class.

3. Conclusion

Among above various factors, the teahers are the most important to change the unfavorable conditions on the aspects of teachers themselves and students, teaching mathods and materials. But to do so, the teachers must have a good command of English, a good knowledge of ELT methodology

and skills to use it as well as a spirit of utter devotion to ELT work. If possible, they should be provided with an opportunity to be further trained in teahcers colleges and universities. At the same time, they themselves should use every means available to enlarge their knowledge of English, ELT methology and familiar ize themselves with the communicative language teaching.

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